Axelrod, Julius 1996 A

Dr. Julius Axelrod Oral History 1996 A

Download the PDF: Axelrod_Julius_Oral_History_1996_A (PDF 65 kB)

This is an interview of Dr. Julius Axelrod, taken on January 19, 1996, at his home in the Grosvenor Apartments in Bethesda, Maryland. The interviewer is Dr. Martin Flavin.

Flavin: This is our first interview, and we don't know how many of these we're going to want to do. Julie can say, "Get out of here," after five minutes--

Axelrod: You mentioned that five minutes will do--

Flavin: --or one hour, or we may go on and on.

Axelrod: Okay.

Flavin: The proposal I made to him is that his scientific work of the last 50 years has been written up by himself and by others repeatedly, and there have also been interviews on this, so what I think might be interesting would be to talk entirely about his early life, from the very beginning up until he came to Goldwater and the National Institutes of Health. And I think to begin with, in case this is a still-born project, what would surely be useful to others would be just some names, places and dates, some of these things that we wouldn't come back to for a long time if we go through with this. So, according to the records, to follow along those lines, Julie was born on May 30, 1912, on East Houston Street in New York City.

Axelrod: It's Houston (HOUSETON pronunciation) Street.

Flavin: Houston.

Axelrod: That's how it was pronounced where I lived in New York. In fact, I remember an incident where I wanted to go to NYU uptown. I had great ambitions to go to a school where I had a chance to get into medical school, and there was an uptown NYU and a downtown. The uptown was more like a classical college. And I was interviewed, and the interviewer asked me where I lived, and I said, "I live on East 'Houseton' Street," and he says, "You mean Houston Street?" And I knew I would never get in.

Flavin: Well, so I made a serious blunder to start with?

Axelrod: I'm sure most of the world pronounces it Houston, but New Yorkers pronounce it "Houseton."

Flavin: Do you remember the street number?

Axelrod: Sure. 415.

Flavin: 415.

Axelrod: East Houston Street.

Flavin: Do you have any siblings, brothers and sisters?

Axelrod: Yes. I have two sisters, one of which died last week.

Flavin: I'm sorry to hear that.

Axelrod: They're younger than I am. I'm the oldest.

Flavin: Right. You're the oldest. Do you remember the years that they were born?

Axelrod: Yes, very vaguely. I remember the person that's most prominent in my mind was my mother, and I'd like to give you an idea of where East Houston Street was in those days. It was the Lower East Side of New York. It was mainly a Jewish ghetto. Most of the people were either working people or lower middle class. And it was dominated, apparently, by a Yiddish culture.

Flavin: So, what were the names of your two sisters?

Axelrod: Gertrude and Pearl.

Flavin: Okay. We don't need to spell those, I think. Any odd names we have to spell. And one has died last week?

Axelrod: Right. She was 80.

Flavin: And the other is?

Axelrod: The other is 76. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. (Since this interview my sister Pearl died of acute leukemia.)

Flavin: She stayed in New York all her life then?

Axelrod: Right. My oldest sister who died lived in Florida for about 20 years.

Flavin: Well, we'll come back to all these things.

Now, your father is said to have come from Polish Galicia?

Axelrod: Yes. So was my mother.

Flavin: And his name was Isadore?

Axelrod: Isadore. Yes.

Flavin: I-S-A-D-O-R-E. And your mother is said to have come from Vienna?

Axelrod: My maternal grandfather came from Vienna. He met my grandmother in Poland, evidently, and they married there in Galicia too, and my grandfather's father came from Vienna--I don't know for what reason he came to Poland, but he did, and he met my grandmother and they married. They married very young.

And my father met my mother after they both came to the States.

Flavin: So your mother was born in Poland but--

Axelrod: My grandfather was born in Vienna, however my father's side of the family lived in Poland, in Holechev. It was a little village, as I can remember.

Flavin: So your parents met, I presume, in New York City?

Axelrod: In New York. Well, the people who immigrated, the so-called "greenhorns," they used to meet at some of the clubs, or whatever, "Landsmann," they called them, and my father met my mother at one of these get togethers.

Flavin: What would "Landsmann" be? Is that Yiddish?

Axelrod: A landsmann is somebody that comes from the same part of the old country that you do.

Flavin: Oh yes. Did you give your mother's maiden name yet?

Axelrod: Yes. Leichtling. Molly Leightling.

Flavin: You'd better spell that.

Axelrod: L-E-I-C-H-T-L-I-N-G. Leightling.

Flavin: And your parents have obviously deceased long ago?

Axelrod: Yes. Well, they died--my mother in '73--and my father in '75. They both lived into their eighties. Good genes there.

Flavin: Okay. Let's see. When you were young and growing up, and I gather you stayed in this same apartment?

Axelrod: Yes. It was a tenement. At first it was a cold water tenement. It had these railroad flats and one room bordered on another. And we had a coal stove and the coalmen used to deliver the coal. And we lived on the fifth floor. And it was a cold water flat, but I think ultimately, after many years, they had hot water. It was the way people lived then in that particular part of the city.

Flavin: Were there others, besides the three children and the parents, in the household, living in it?

Axelrod: No. But my mother had seven sisters. My grandmother was very prolific. My grandfather came to this country and he brought my mother, who was the eldest, and then he brought the rest of his family little by little over a period of four or five years. He was a shoemaker, and he brought my grandmother and seven sisters and two brothers. One of the brothers, the youngest brother, was born in America. He was actually younger than I was. My mother married young and so--

Flavin: So you had an uncle that was--

Axelrod: An uncle who was younger than I was.

Flavin: --younger than you were. But they didn't live in your household?

Axelrod: Oh, no, no. They came to this country-- I don't remember the details, but my grandfather arranged to envigorate them. He lived in the Lower East Side too. But after a few years my grandparents moved to the Bronx. My grandfather had a shoe store in the Bronx.

Flavin: So just, okay, to sort of finish the dates, names and figures, you were married in 1938 to Sally Taub, T-A-U-B, and your wife is also--

Axelrod: Dead.

Flavin: --deceased.

Axelrod: She passed away four years ago. We were married for 53 years.

Flavin: A fantastic change then after that. Fifty-three years. And you had two children?

Axelrod: I had two children. One was born in 1945 and the other was born in 1949.

Flavin: What were their names?

Axelrod: Paul. The oldest one was Paul and the younger one was Alfred, which we called him Fred.

Flavin: And are they living still?

Axelrod: Oh, yes. Well, they're both living in Wisconsin. One is a forester and the other is a Professor of Anthropology in a small liberal arts college.

Flavin: And grandchildren, I presume?

Axelrod: I have four grandchildren--two girls and two boys--and each of my children have a boy and a girl, so it's sort of very symmetrical.

Flavin: And great-grandchildren?

Axelrod: No.

Flavin: Not yet?

Axelrod: My oldest grandchild is 13.

(Recorder is turned off and on.)

Flavin: Well, we seem to be getting the message recorded all right, so we'll continue a little while. And I don't know what you really want to talk about most, but if we want to say we're starting and we're going way back, I guess we want--

Axelrod: Well, again, it's hard to recall many details that happened. I think my earliest memory is when I was four, when I was chasing another kid and I tripped and fell and broke my knee, and my mother took me to the hospital, a local hospital, near where I lived. That's my earliest memory.

Flavin: By the way, were you born at home or in the hospital?

Axelrod: Born at home.

Flavin: I know I have really three kinds of memories, real memories, things that I know I did remember but, you know, I remembered them when I was 15, and so I still have them up here, but I don't have the real original memory anymore. And then things I've been told, which I may or may not have heard correctly. But, in any case, what I think I was told, or what you think you were told, is more to do with you than maybe what really happened anyway. So, do you want to try to start with the grandparents, or even further back?

Axelrod: Well, my grandfather died relatively young. He died in 1923.

Flavin: This was on which side?

Axelrod: This is my mother's side. My father's side, my grandfather remained in Poland and he was killed by the Nazis.

Flavin: That's your father's father?

Axelrod: My father's father.

Flavin: Do you know what camp he--

Axelrod: What he did? I think he was a veterinarian or somethinglike that. I don't know.

Flavin: But I mean which of the Nazi camps he died in? Which concentration camp?

Axelrod: I have no idea. What I heard was that that part of the country, what they did, when the Nazis invaded Russia over Poland, they lined them up and machine gunned them.

Flavin: Right. So it was very early?

Axelrod: Very early.

Flavin: Okay. What--

Axelrod: My maternal grandfather was a shoemaker. He died of tuberculosis in 1923. And my grandmother took over his business. She sold supplies for shoemakers, heels and leather goods. She was a very enterprising--

Flavin: This was in Brooklyn?

Axelrod: No. That was in the Bronx. She was a very dominating woman. I have a picture I can show you of my grand-- This is my grandmother and this is my mother. These are the seven sisters.

Flavin: Oh my goodness. Yes. I think that Victoria Harden is going to be very interested in anything like that, you know, pictures and anything from the early days.

Axelrod: There is only one remaining survivor, my Aunt Bertha. She's 93, and she's very alert, very sharp. But I remember visiting my aunt in the Bronx when they were mostly single. A very lively family.

I know my grandfather's brother--I mentioned--he was a member of the Vienna Philharmonic. He was a violinist. That's about as far back as I can go.

Flavin: Your great grandfather on your father's--

Axelrod: On my mother's side.

Flavin: On your mother's side.

Axelrod: Yes. I don't know much about my father's side of the family--most of them were killed, again, by the Nazis--and it was my mother's side that I had a greater interaction with, the family on my mother's side, with the seven sisters.

Flavin: Well, I guess we're at the stage then of early memories, and anything that you'd like to talk about. Your father has been described as a basket maker.

Axelrod: Yes. He had a small business. I don't know where he went to trade. He was a small businessman where he had one or two workers. He made flower baskets and fruit baskets, and he'd sell them to these up-scale groceries, Gristedes, and places like that. And I remember an early memory of my father. He used to have a horse and wagon to deliver his baskets and I used to love, on Saturdays, going out to sell these baskets to these merchants.

Flavin: The shop was separate from where you lived?

Axelrod: Yes, it was. It was on the Lower East Side. It was East 2nd Street. I don't know the number. And I learned the trade. I started working at 13 as a basket maker, and I was pretty good at it.

Flavin: Was it hard to learn?

Axelrod: No. It's just skill. But I found it so boring. It was one thing that really influenced me to go to college. I said, "I don't want to do this."

Flavin: Nowadays craftspeople making art baskets--

Axelrod: Yes. I know. But this was on mass scale. It was not basket people. You know, you had to produce and produce large numbers to make a living. It wasn't very easy. He had his own designs, you know, and so he had to make it attractive enough so it would persuade the merchants to buy baskets.

Flavin: Did you really stick with it enough you actually complete a--

Axelrod: Well, I had to, because I earned part of my living when I went to college. I went to college during the depression, so I had to earn some money.

Flavin: But he was able to survive through the bad years and the good years?

Axelrod: Yes, he did. Yes. He didn't do badly. He had a problem though. He liked to gamble, and so my mother had a tough time.

Flavin: Was it hard work, as well as being monotonous?

Axelrod: No, it's not hard. What I did is different parts you had to nail an outline, make the outline of the basket, and this is what I did, and then there were weavers who just wove around this outline.

As a matter of fact, I remember I had to put a nail in and hammer, put a nail in and hammer, like this, which was pretty monotonous.

Flavin: It's handwork. No machine tools?

Axelrod: No, no. It was hand, all hand.

Flavin: At nine years old.

Well, I don't know. We could start with more memories of what your house--your apartment--was like.

Axelrod: Well, my house, I remember that my mother used to get up first to put on the coal stove on because there was no heat. But we had heat from a coal stove in the kitchen. And I remember the street that I lived in. I had a lot of friends. I played street games.

Flavin: What sort of games?

Axelrod: Stickball. You know? Like a sort of a stick. We used to hit over-- And the bases were sewers. You hit two sewers or three sewers. You know?

Flavin: They were the goals?

Axelrod: The goals. And we played all kinds of games. ringalevio and-- That's one game I remember. I used to like going out. I used to have a pair of skates. I used to love skating. I'd hitch rides on the back of trucks and things.

Flavin: I saw one comment of yours that was quite eloquent. I don't think I remember it perfectly, but it was something about your parents being not very cultured in English but moderately cultured in Yiddish. Did I get that about right?

Axelrod: Yes. My mother could barely read English. She learned-- My father could. And they spoke Yiddish to each other. I spoke Yiddish. And when they didn't want me to understand something they spoke in Polish.

Flavin: Did you grow up speaking Yiddish to your parents?

Axelrod: Yiddish, most of the time. Yiddish and English. A mixture.

Have you read the book *Call of Sleep* by Henry Roth? Have you heard of it?

Flavin: No, I haven't read it.

Axelrod: Well, it gives you an idea of the life I lived. It was a classic, you know? I didn't know whether you heard of Henry Roth.

Flavin: I know the author's name, but I haven't read the book.

Axelrod: Yes. It was a classic. It was revised in the '60s, about life, in a tenement in a lower east side part of the city.

Flavin: This coal stove that was in the kitchen, now how cold did it get in the other rooms?

Axelrod: Well, we barely used the living room. The kitchen was the center of the house.

Flavin: But the bedrooms and--

Axelrod: We had what is known as featherbeds. You know, feather quilts? And it was one of the prized possessions, having a feather quilt.

Flavin: So, in wintertime, until you went to bed the kitchen was the--

Axelrod: I sat in the kitchen. I did my homework there. I did all my reading there. It was the social center. That's in the winter. In the summer we used to go into the living room, in normal weather.

Flavin: And your siblings, I'm going to have to go back and listen to this because my memory is gone, but they were quite a bit younger than you were?

Axelrod: Yes. My sister, my oldest sister, was three years younger and my youngest sister was six years younger than I was.

Flavin: So, at the time you--

Axelrod: But I had very little to do with my sisters. They were girls--you know--and we never played with girls.

Flavin: I sort of picture you all three studying in the kitchen.

Axelrod: Well, I was the scholar in the family. I was pretty good. I wasn't brilliant, but I got A's and B's.

Flavin: When did you start reading? Before you went to school?

Axelrod: When did I start reading? You mean actually reading? No. Actually I had a little trouble learning how to read. I was held back in the First Grade because I couldn't read. But then I learned to read and, when I did, I read a great deal. There was a library about a block from my house, the Hamilton Fish Park Library, and I remember my first library card at 7, and I used to go there four or five times a week.

Flavin: Would you read there or take the books--

Axelrod: No. I'd take the books home. I read a little there, but mostly I took them home. I read a great deal.

Flavin: But your sisters didn't do that sort of thing?

Axelrod: No.

Flavin: Do you have any feeling for how you got--someone influenced you--or how you got interested in following that course and going to the library?

Axelrod: Yes. Well I remember clearly I used to go there fairly often to the library and I knew where to find the books I wanted. I didn't read beyond my limits, but I did read whatever I could. I loved reading.

Flavin: It just developed that that's the way--

Axelrod: Yes. It just came. My parents didn't read.

Flavin: Didn't read at all? The newspapers?

Axelrod: Well, the newspapers. My father read "Der Vorwarts." It was a socialist newspaper.

Flavin: What was the name of the paper?

Axelrod: "Der Vorwarts."

Flavin: Could you spell that?

Axelrod: "The Forward," it's called. Now it's called "The Forward." It's still on the East Side. "The Forward."

Flavin: But the Yiddish was?

Axelrod: Vorwarts, which means forward. Vorwarts. And it was a publication where they used to have interesting stories, "Bintel Brief." That's letters from the home country. They used to describe what happened in Poland or Russia, or what happens here. It was a very interesting series called "The Bintel Brief," where people described their lives, you know, as an immigrant in America. "The Golden Medina," that's the golden country, and I.B. Singer wrote for "The Vorwarts." That's where he wrote most of his stories. But I couldn't read Hebrew very--Yiddish--very well. I never was very religious. My parents were sort of. On the high holidays they went to synagogue, and fasted on Yom Kippur. But I never had any real religious feelings.

Flavin: Neither your parents, nor grandparents--

Axelrod: Well, my parents they were religious in a way, but they weren't "Froeme Jeden," you know, that's very religious Jews. They you know felt Jewish and they abided as much as they could by-- I know we were never served pork or ham at home or bacon or anything like that.

Flavin: You had, from 1912 to '33, these Messages from Home that the newspaper printed. That's 20 years there before the Nazi Period began.

Axelrod: Oh yes. From 1880 to 1920 there was a great immigration from Eastern Europe, Jewish Immigration. Most of them settled on the Lower East Side of New York. This is where the great majority of the Jews who are living now here came. The earlier immigration from Germany, they became the business people--the bankers--and even earlier than that there was a Spanish Jewish immigration called Sephardic Jews. They were very early Jews during the Civil War.

Flavin: That I didn't know anything about.

Axelrod: Oh sure. Sephardic Jews.

Flavin: From North Africa?

Axelrod: No, no. From Spain. They were from Italy, Spain, and Holland. And many went to South America too. You see, it was during the Inquisition in 1492 when the Jews went to Italy and France and to Holland. But those are very early Jews. There weren't that many. In fact, there was a Jewish member of the cabinet in Jefferson Davis' cabinet, I think, a Sephardic Jew.

Flavin: And in your community on Houston Street, there are still distinctions between those families that are Sephardic Jews?

Axelrod: Well, there weren't that many Sephardic Jews. There were German Jews. And the German Jews--I have a lot of books on that--the German Jews looked down on the Eastern European Jews. They thought they were uncouth, uneducated. The German Jews were mostly very wealthy.

Flavin: I spent a sabbatical year in Israel and so I heard a lot about these feelings towards the German Jews.

Axelrod: They were sort of a little ashamed of the Eastern European Jews.

Flavin: So, the bedrooms were cold. Do you remember other things about the house?

Axelrod: Well, we had an icebox where the iceman used to bring up ice. And in the wintertime we used to keep food out on the window ledge to keep cold. Oh, I remember it was a five flight walk upstairs. The neighbors were very, very friendly and helped each other.

I remember the streets a lot more. I remember I used to-- We were very close to the East River. That's where I learned how to swim, just going off the docks in the East River.

And I'm trying to remember. I loved to rollerskate and I loved to walk through the streets of the East Side. There were certain areas you wouldn't walk through because they were mostly Ukrainians and Poles. They used to call us names and they'd take your hat and swipe things, and so you stayed away from those neighborhoods.

There was, on the East Side, there was called the Educational Alliance, which was sort of a social house. I remember I joined the Boy Scouts. We had meetings there. I was a member of the Boy Scouts. I was a Star Scout, not quite an Eagle Scout, and we used to have plays. When it's when I was in high school I attended lectures at Cooper Union was on 8th Street and Astor Place. They had people like John Dewey and Clifton Faddiman. I used to love going to those lectures. I don't remember when it was, but I think in high school.

Flavin: Did that go back to the Civil War period?

Axelrod: The Cooper Union? Probably. I don't know. The building was old. It was just about Civil War vintage. This is where Lincoln gave his famous speech at the Cooper Union.

Flavin: That's what I was trying to think of.

Axelrod: Yes.

Flavin: He chose what was, I guess, a working class cultural center.

Axelrod: Yes. The Cooper Union. Well, there was a school there. It was a sort of a technical school. Yes, we were working people-- You know, the politics there were all very socialist. In fact, we had a socialist assemblyman. I remember during Election Day we used to try to swipe wagons and burn them--make bonfires. In fact, I have an etching By John Sloane, about these bonfires.

Flavin: We've just been looking at a drawing by John Sloane of a bonfire in the street on an Election Day in that part of New York City which apparently was just-- You weren't vandalizing the whole-- You weren't burning everything?

Axelrod: No. We'd vandalize as much as we could. You know? One thing I can tell you that was a sort of dichotomy. There were people who were gangsters in the city that lived on the lower east side. There were some very famous gangsters. And there was also an intellectual group of kids who read a lot and talked politics and things like that. I was sort of in between. Flavin:The gangsters were gangs?

Axelrod: As kids they used to rob fruit off the wagons and then there were real gangsters living there. It was during the Prohibition Period. Yes. But I just had casual knowledge of these gangsters. I didn't know any. Sometimes they were pointed out to me, a famous gangster. They were sort of folk heros, some of them.

Flavin: So, besides the roughnecks in the Ukrainian and the Polish District there were gangs in the Jewish Community as well?

Axelrod: Yes.

Flavin: And you had to stay away from them?

Axelrod: Yes. Well, we didn't hang out. I was too young. They intrigued me.

And we used to have discussions when we were kids about all kinds of things and I was very curious about things and would talk a lot.

Flavin: The socialist Yiddish newspaper that your father read--

Axelrod: Yes. "Der Vorwarts."

Flavin: I don't know much about that period, but it was the period when there was a labor movement.

Axelrod: Oh, there was. There was, you know, the Palmer Raids where they tried to pick up communists or anarchists and ship them back to Europe.

Flavin: The I.W.W. and then--

Axelrod: I.W.W. The Wobblies. Yes.

Flavin: And then the AFL, I guess?

Axelrod: There were the Wobblies, Gompers, a socialist was a big hero. He was head of the labor union, the AFL, and Eugene Debs. They were great heros.

Flavin: They were sort of, I guess, separate, because was your father more with the Wobbly or the AFL?

Axelrod: My father was nothing. He was a socialist sympathizer. He read the paper, but he had no political interest at all. But I did. I was very curious about these things, and I remember Saturday night my mother used to give me a dime to get a corned beef sandwich. That was the big event of my week to get a corned beef sandwich. And then further down we had Yonis Knishes, where they had knishes, and then Katz's Delicatessen. There were a lot of well known stores, they still are there. I'm trying to remember--I know they had theaters. My mother used to take me to the Yiddish Theater on 2nd Avenue.

Flavin: But your life was all in this area?

Axelrod: In this area. In fact, the first real tree I really saw, when my class had an outing to Central Park when I was about 11 or 12, and it was like going to the country.

Flavin: The first real tree?

Axelrod: Well, you know, real countryside. Yes. It was a very limited life. My domain was right a few blocks from where I was born.

Flavin: Later, when you were in the Boy Scouts--

Axelrod: Oh, yes. Well the Boy Scouts was--

Flavin: --then you went out?

Axelrod: Yes. Later on. But I think I even went to camp. Maybe once I went to camp.

Flavin: That's interesting. Eleven years before you went to Central Park?

Axelrod: Well, maybe I was a little-- I don't know. I was pretty young. But I remember it was a great outing.

Flavin: So, do you feel like trying to describe what your sisters seemed--

Axelrod: My what?

Flavin: Your sisters, what they seemed to be like?

Axelrod: Well, I didn't pay much attention to my sisters. No. They were nothing special. You know, they had the life of Jewish girls there and, you know, I remember very little about my sisters. They weren't quite in my milieu. You know? First, they were girls, and they, I don't think, had the same interests I did.

Flavin: Did they share a bedroom?

Axelrod: Yes. I don't know what the arrangements were. I think we-- I don't know how we did it, but I think we had either two or three bedrooms. I don't remember. But I think I used to sleep with my sisters until I don't remember what age.

Flavin: All three of you shared a room?

Axelrod: Yes.

Flavin: But you didn't do-- In winter, at least, you didn't spend much time in those ice cold--

Axelrod: Oh, in those bedrooms? No. Just to sleep. Yes.

Where were you-- May I ask--I don't know whether it's relevant--where were you brought up?

Flavin: Yes. Well, I could talk about me. I don't know whether I should turn this to "pause"--

Axelrod: Why don't you turn it off and let's--

Flavin: --when I talk about myself, because I think the foremost rule is that I'm not supposed to talk about myself. So should I put it on pause?

Axelrod: Yes. Put it on pause.

Flavin: Should I put it on pause?

(Brief pause.)

Flavin: I'll just say we made quite a long pause because Julie wanted me to talk about where and how I grew up and then we got onto my being in--

Axelrod: Well, I was curious, you know, since I've been telling so much about my early youth. I don't know whether it's that interesting. I think your's was much more interesting.

Flavin: No. I don't think of my youth as something that I would want to tell you about. I was not--

Axelrod: Well one thing--I don't know whether I want to repeat it again--although at that time I didn't know any different, the second half of my life was much more interesting I think and much happier. But it's something I'd rather remember than my first half. Again, I didn't realize how difficult it was until, I think, just in retrospect--

Flavin: What a difficult time economically it--

Axelrod: Yes. In fact, it was a difficult life. You know? Prospects weren't very good. And so just graduating during the Depression and having to work most of my early life I didn't have very much fun. I had these economic problems.

Flavin: Do you want to-- Do you think we should stop right now?

Axelrod: Yes. Let's try it one more time and see how it goes. You know? Okay? What do you think?

Flavin: I think that's a good idea. I go for anything you go for. Okay. We're going to turn this off now and we'll hopefully try it again maybe a week from today.

(Whereupon, the interview concludes.)